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SMART HOME

GOOGLE NEXUS Q REVIEW

Google's media streamer is here to entertain... but who's the audience?

By [Bryan Bishop](#) | [@bcbishop](#) | Jun 29, 2012, 6:44pm EDT

Six months ago former Google CEO Eric Schmidt predicted that [Google TV would be embedded on the majority of new televisions](#) by this summer. That hasn't happened, but it's not stopping Mountain View from entering the living room from a different angle — with its own branded media streamer, the Nexus Q. The Q acts exclusively as a receiver for audio and video content from Google's online media services, all controlled with your Android tablet or smartphone. At \$299, it's positioned as a [US-made premium product](#) with a premium price. In a market crowded with the likes of Roku, Apple, Sonos, and others, is there room for Google's entrant, and do its features and design warrant the cost? Read on to find out.

Video Review

VIDEO REVIEW

Hardware

HARDWARE



In a living room world of tiny rectangular boxes, the Q has no qualms about distinguishing itself right out of the gate. The device is a two-pound sphere, split at a 45-degree angle by a ring of 32 LEDs. The entire upper half of the Q is a free-spinning volume knob, while a pinprick blue LED eyes you from the front. That single LED isn't a mere stylistic touch; it also reveals the location of the Q's touch-sensitive mute button. 1 GB of RAM and 16GB of flash storage are included, with an array of recessed ports in the back — including both Micro HDMI and optical audio outs, an ethernet jack, and a USB port for developers that would like to hack the device. A set of banana-style connectors give the option of hooking up external speakers directly, taking advantage of the 25-watt amplifier built into the device.

It turns out that banana connector option can be more handy than you'd think at first. When trying to swap the Q into my own entertainment system, I discovered that the recessed optical audio port was actually too narrow to plug in the cables I use for my other devices. Additionally, the choice of Micro HDMI over a standard HDMI port meant I

had to do some digging behind the TV to get the Q connected. It's not a deal-breaker by any means — and Google does ship a Micro HDMI to HDMI cable with the streamer — but I couldn't help but think that some practicality had been jettisoned to achieve the tidy set-up on the back of the Q.

THE MATTE FINISH LOOKS AND FEELS GREAT

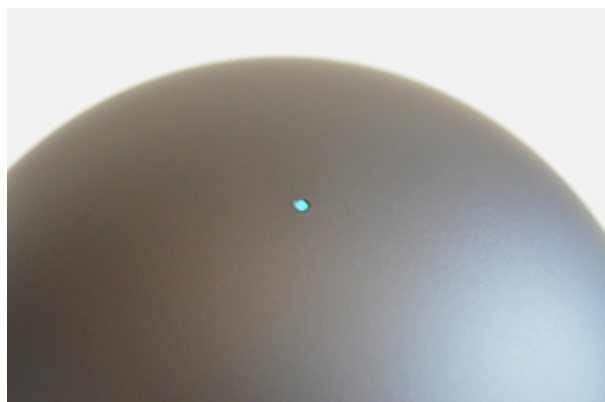
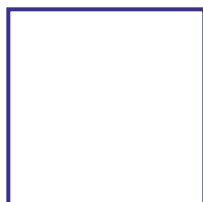
There's no denying it's an attractive piece of hardware, however. The matte finish looks good and feels great, and the base of the Q is weighted just so; the Q practically begs you to touch it. It does have a tendency to pick up smudges and smears rather quickly, though they weren't very noticeable when it was sitting next to the television.

Making the leap from hooked-up to up-and-running was a bit more difficult than anticipated. The Q has no interface of its own, and requires an Android device to manage it and initiate any media streaming. Not that you'd know that when you power the Q on; instead, you're presented with an image of a blue sphere on your television, along with the word "hello" in several different languages.

Tapping an NFC-enabled device — I used a Samsung Galaxy Nexus and the [new Nexus 7](#) during my testing — initiates the download of the Nexus Q management app. Upon launch you select what room the Q in question is located in, enter the password for your Wi-Fi network, and you're good to go... for a while, at least. I had connectivity problems with multiple devices, on two different Q units. It wasn't clear if excessive Wi-Fi interference was the problem, or something within the hardware itself, but the streamer is definitely finicky about connecting with other devices.



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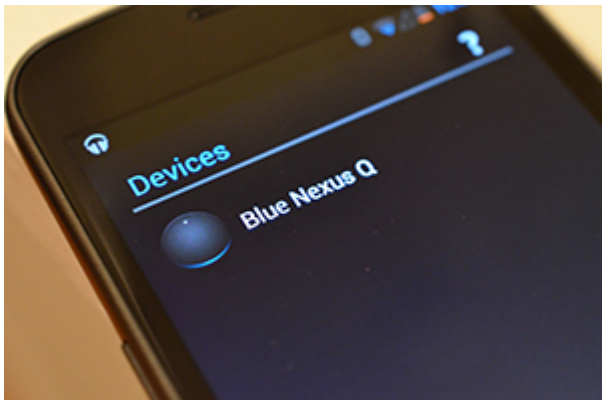
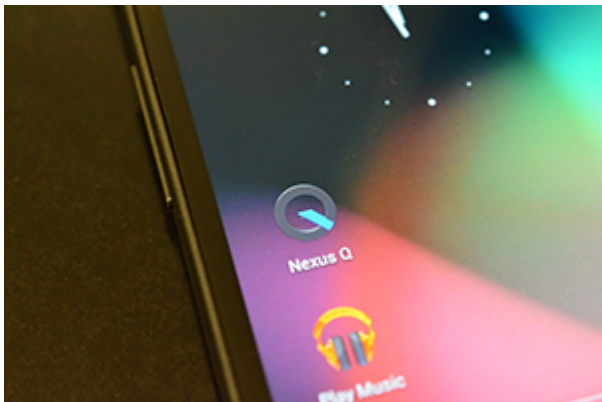




Nexus Q app

NEXUS Q APP

THE ONLY WAY TO CONTROL YOUR Q



Given the Q's lack of interface, the only way to change settings are via an external app. It's a relatively bare-bones affair, unsurprisingly called Nexus Q. You can adjust the brightness of the LEDs on any of the Qs you have connected in your home (it's designed to allow the use of multiple devices in a single location), turn off the various output jacks, or change the visuals that play back when you're listening to music (more on that later). It's perfectly functional, but it does feel clunky to be using an app to control such basic settings, especially when under the hood the Nexus Q is running Android 4.0.4 on a dual-core A9 processor.

The Q was originally demoed at Google I/O last year under the codename Project Tungsten — Tungsten is still listed as the product name when examining debug information for the Q — and at the time was an audio-only device. Given that pedigree, the separate management app makes sense, but it would be a much more intuitive experience if Google took advantage of that HDMI output to let users perform these tasks directly.

Music

MUSIC PLAYBACK

LISTEN TO WHATEVER YOU LIKE — AS LONG AS GOOGLE HOSTS IT

All streaming with the Q is initiated from within one of three Android apps: YouTube, Play Music, and Play Video. The trick here is that it's not actually streaming from your phone or tablet at all; rather, your device is serving as a glorified remote control, telling Google's servers to send media down to the Q over the web. When running Play Music, for example, an icon appears next to the share menu icon. Tapping it allows you to switch the music from playing on the device to playing on the Q, and the transition was usually quick and seamless. Several times one device or the other would lose connection, requiring me to quit the Nexus Q app, but things came back online immediately thereafter.

The good news is that along with Play Store content, any tunes you have stored in Google Music are also available for playback. The bad news is that's it. Any sideloaded music files are out of bounds unless you upload them to Google Music first, and subscription services like Rdio and Spotify are locked out altogether. It's the same story on the video side: Hulu and Netflix customers, you're out of luck.

In terms of sound quality, the 25-watt amp was more than loud enough to fill my apartment, and in conjunction with the speakers I was using provided a clean and detailed sound. In this sense, the Q would be a fine choice for someone hosting a party, or looking for an audio system for the backyard.

During music playback, the LED ring on the Q pulses and breathes various hues in sync with the rhythm and volume of the music. It's joined by a visualizer on the TV, with five different "themes" available via the Nexus Q app. The LED ring is undoubtedly fun; it

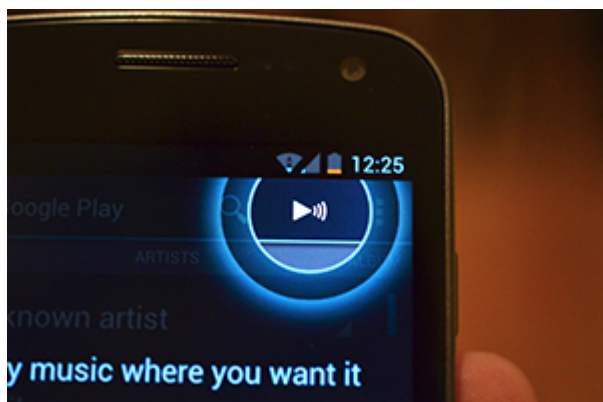
brings a touch of whimsy to the Q, and only adds to its physical appeal. The visualizer is another matter altogether. It's simply another riff on the same visual gimmickry we've been seeing in audio visualizers for years now — and it feels like it.

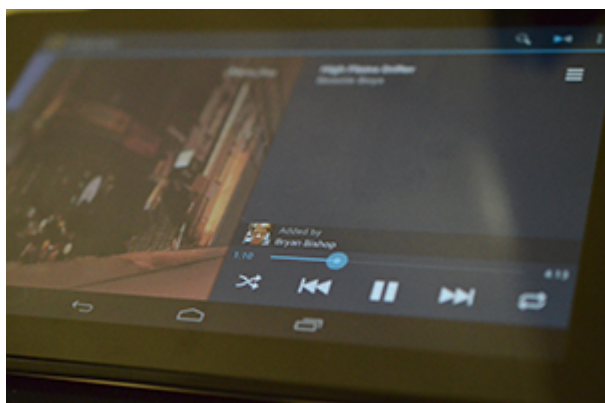
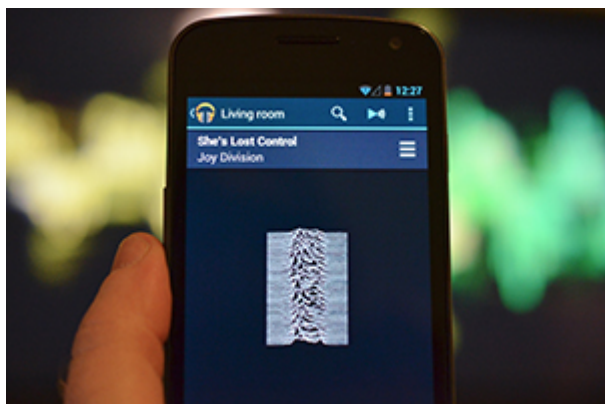
Attempting to mute the Q during playback revealed another of its hardware weaknesses. Namely, it doesn't work that well, repeatedly requiring several taps to mute or restore audio during playback.

THE Q'S MARQUEE FEATURE NEEDS A RETHINK

Google is touting the Q as the "world's first social streaming media player," primarily due to its collaborative playlisting: friends can come over and play their own music on your Q, or you can build a group playlist together. It's a feature with great appeal — there have been versions of the same idea [on competing platforms](#) for a while now — but the Q stumbles in the execution. While tapping on the options for a given song allows you to add it to the current song queue, selecting that same song directly will immediately begin playback, bypassing what's already in the queue. Even worse, if you're viewing a list of tunes in playlist, album, or artist sort, selecting one song will add it *plus all subsequent songs* to the queue. Testing the feature out with a friend quickly pivoted from a fun musical collaboration into a frustrating game of accidental playlist-jacking.

To be fair, this implementation problem could be resolved with a software update — but this is the marquee feature of the Q. It's so important that the device's name is a cute play on "queue." If there's one feature the Nexus Q should nail from the end user's perspective, it's this one — and it falls short.

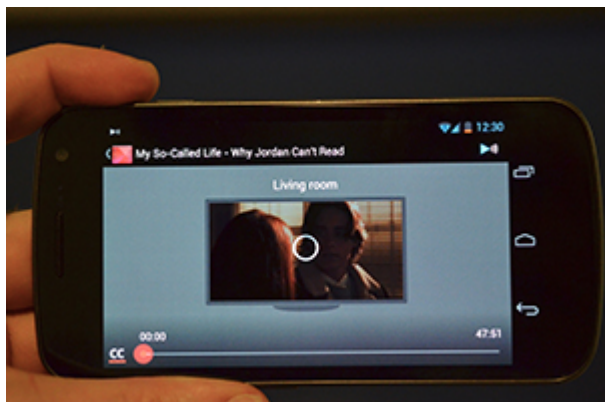




Video

VIDEO PLAYBACK

WELL, AT LEAST STANDARD DEFINITION WORKS FINE





Sticking to the Q's methodology, video playback is initiated via either YouTube or the Play Movies app. Watching our own [Ben Popper host an episode of 90 Seconds on The Verge](#) on YouTube provided one of the most impressive displays of the Q's prowess: with the episode streaming to my television, I turned off all the radios on my phone. The video continued playing, direct from YouTube, and when I turned the radios back on the scrubber in the YouTube app immediately snapped into dead sync with the video on the TV, restoring control of the stream to my phone.

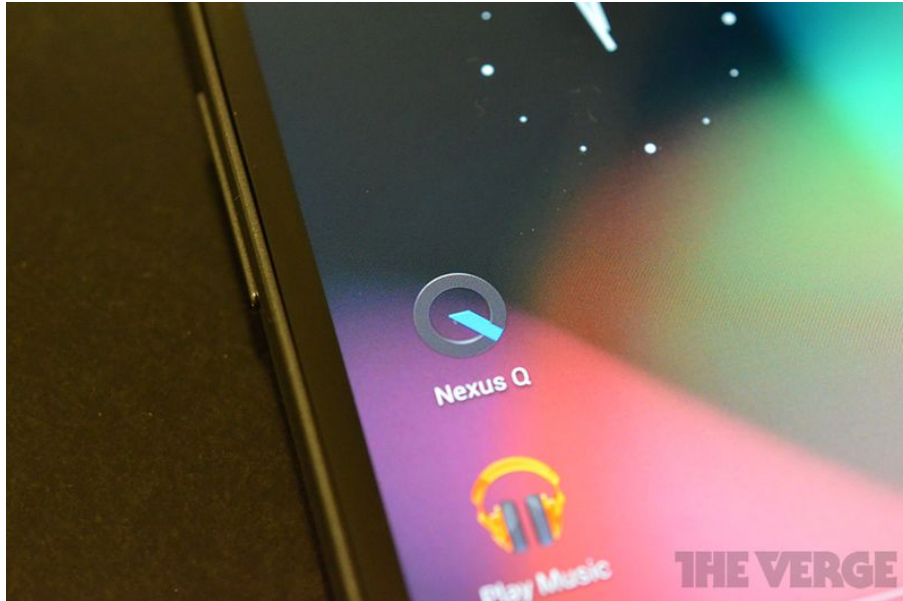
Video from Play Movies, however, was less than ideal.

I rented several high-definition movies and a pair of standard-definition television shows. While the episode of *My So-Called Life* played back fine on both the Q and my mobile devices, *The Dark Knight* stuttered and stalled on Google's streamer — despite playing back without issue on the Nexus 7 and Galaxy Nexus. Video quality was also noticeably poor on the Q, with both movies suffering from an overly-dark image and exaggerated, ruddy flesh tones. Now, I wasn't expecting Blu-ray quality video here, but I was expecting the Q to perform on par with its competition, but it appears Google still has some work to do.

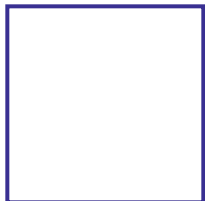
Echoing the disappointment from the music side of things, it's not possible to push your own personal videos from your device to the Q. To be fair, it's not touted as such — Google is upfront that the Q is for Play Store and YouTube content only — but it does

feel like there's a baseline expectation about what these kind of devices should be able to do in 2012, and AirPlay-style streaming is one of them. With sharing of photos also off the table, I found myself counting the things that the Q couldn't do rather than those it could.

GRID VIEW



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5

VERGE SCORE

GOOGLE NEXUS Q



GOOD STUFF

- Whimsical, attractive hardware design
- YouTube streaming works great
- Painless pairing process

BAD STUFF

- Only works with Google Music, Play Store content, and YouTube
- Confusing control scheme
- Poor video quality with buffering issues

A STREAMER ONLY GOOGLE COULD MAKE

With so many buggy features and functionality gaps, the biggest question about the Nexus Q is who it's intended for. Other boxes on the market offer more functionality at

lower price points, and DLNA streaming is just a short trip to the Play Store away. The design is absolutely attractive, but \$299 is a lot to ask no matter how gorgeous the Q may be (the fact that Google is selling \$399 Triad speakers to go with it also bears questioning). All things considered, it doesn't seem a practical option for apartment or home use, though it could be great for workplaces or offices that want a very specific set of functions and are already heavily invested in Google's ecosystem.

There could be platform-related reasons for the limitations as well. System-wide streaming would no doubt come with a new version of Android, and at the rate handset manufacturers and carriers update their devices, tying the Q to a given version of Android would severely limit its potential audience (as it is, the Q will support Android 2.3 and higher at launch).

Perhaps the best explanation is that Google is simply taking a page from one of its biggest competitors and building a device that would be most at home at Google itself. From the clever, fanciful design, to the ambitious ideas, to the feeling that some features should still bear the "beta" tag, Google's first self-made product is in many ways representative of the company itself — in both its many strengths and weaknesses.

While that might be forgivable — even admirable — with software and services that are distributed for free, when it comes to expensive consumer electronics it's simply just a set of good intentions that don't come together in the end.

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